

# Response to public consultation on the Year 1 phonics screening check

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# Foreword

## From Nick Gibb, Minister of State for Schools



1.1 I believe it is vital that all children learn how to read early in their education. One of the great pleasures of visiting a good school is listening to the children talk with real passion about their favourite books – the characters they have grown to love and the knowledge they have learnt. Being able to read is the skill that unlocks the benefits of education. Despite the efforts of teachers and parents, last year 15% of pupils did not reach the expected level in reading at the end of Key Stage 1. At the end of Key Stage 2, 16% of pupils were below level 4 in reading, and 8% of pupils were below level 3. We need to do more to ensure that our children develop into confident, enthusiastic readers.

1.2 We all want children to read fluently for comprehension and pleasure, so that they can access the rest of the curriculum and develop a lifelong love of books. The evidence shows that systematic teaching of synthetic phonics is the best way to drive up standards in reading. Phonics is the most effective way for children to read words, and parents and the public should have confidence that children have grasped this crucial skill. Phonics is a prerequisite for children to become effective readers, but it is not an end in itself. Children should always be taught phonics as part of a language rich curriculum, so that they develop their wider reading skills at the same time.

1.3 I believe it is important the Government develops the phonics screening check. It has been designed to confirm that children are able to decode using phonics to an appropriate standard by the end of Year 1, and to identify those pupils who need additional support. The check will provide parents and teachers with the reassurance they need that each child has learnt the basic code of the language.

1.4 The phonics check will contain some non-words. Non-words are already used in many schools, and they are the quickest and fairest way to assess phonic decoding. Non-words are new to all children, and so this phonics check will identify children who have the knowledge to read any new word, rather than pupils who have already developed a wide vocabulary or a good sight memory. The responses to the consultation repeatedly emphasised that the check must be manageable for schools to administer, and appropriate for children in Year 1. I appreciate these concerns, and so we have made a number of adjustments to our proposals to give schools and teachers greater flexibility when administering the check.

1.5 The screening check will be piloted in a representative sample of approximately 300 schools this June. We will continue to gather evidence and take advice about the policy during the piloting before finalising the assessment arrangements for future years.

# Response to the public consultation on the Year 1 phonics screening check

## Summary of Responses

2.1 There were 1071 responses to the public consultation. The detailed breakdown of results from the consultation questions is at **Annex A**, and the main themes from the responses are summarised below. The results quoted below include an analysis of all the answers to the questions, and the additional detailed comments provided by respondents.

### The focus on phonic decoding

2.2 28% of respondents agreed the check should focus on decoding using phonics. 20% respondents argued that children learn to read using a variety of strategies, including using visual and context cues, and the check should take into account these alternative strategies.

2.3 7% of respondents emphasised the importance of teaching children to read for meaning alongside phonics. Some respondents argued the check should reflect this, for example by asking children to read a running text and then show that they have understood the passage. This approach would assess comprehension and vocabulary alongside decoding.

### The benefits of the screening check

2.4 Many respondents were in favour of a check which identified pupils needing extra help with their literacy. 26% queried the benefits of the check, particularly for schools with good teacher assessment practices already in place to track children's progress in phonic decoding.

2.5 Almost all respondents agreed that the check should not be a high stakes assessment. 88% agreed that school by school results should not be published in Performance Tables. 67% of respondents opposed the proposal to include the results in RAISEOnline, although others argued that it would be appropriate for schools to discuss the results from the check with other educational professionals including local authorities and Ofsted.

2.6 Some respondents were opposed to using the data from the check at school level in any way. They argued that making the results available in this format could encourage schools to over-emphasise the importance of phonics in the curriculum as a whole, or disadvantage schools with challenging intakes if the data was not used in context.

### The design of the screening check

2.7 30% of respondents were in favour of using non-words as part of the screening check. These respondents argued non-words are the best method of distinguishing between pupils able to decode using phonics, and pupils with a good sight memory, who may not have the knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences to decode unfamiliar words. Teachers were more likely than other groups of respondents to be in favour of including non-words in the check.

2.8 64% of respondents were against using non-words, including 16% of respondents who said that non-words were confusing. 10% of respondents stated that reading tasks should always be about eliciting meaning from text. These respondents were opposed to using non-words and critical of an assessment method showing 40 individual words out of context.

2.9 A majority of respondents argued the scoring system for the check should be more flexible, by allowing children to self-correct their initial response (91%), and take as long as they need to read each item (51%).

## The manageability of the screening check

2.10 There is a balance between allowing schools sufficient flexibility to organise the check, and ensuring the check is administered consistently to produce standardised scores across schools. Most respondents favoured a window of at least 4 days for the screening check to take place (82%), including some respondents who advocated a ‘testing-when-ready’ approach for this check. 65% of respondents thought that more than one teacher in each school should be able to administer the check to ensure manageability, particularly in large schools.

## Other evidence

3.1 Alongside the consultation we have been collecting other evidence about the check.

### Pre-trial

3.2 Pre-trial visits took place to 16 schools in November and December 2010, and involved pupils working through a sample screening check with a teacher. The purpose of the pre-trial was to understand how pupils respond to the screening check and to identify any issues that arise through the administration.

3.3 Almost all pupils and teachers thought the test materials were appropriate. The feedback which we received from the pre-trialling indicates that we should take forward many aspects of this assessment to the main pilot in the Summer. For example, the check only took an average of 2-3 minutes per pupil to complete, and the 270 pupils involved in the trial did not find the non-words confusing. The technical analysis of responses shows that the questions in the check performed well, and it was possible to differentiate between ability groups.

3.4 A full report of the pre-trialling is available at **Annex B**.

## Academic Evidence

3.5 5% of respondents queried the evidence base for this policy. There is strong evidence that systematic phonics is the best way to teach literacy to all children. A summary of the evidence is attached at **Annex C**.

## Surveys

3.7 The National Council for Parent Teacher Associations recently commissioned a survey of the Coalition’s education agenda involving representative sample of 460 parents. The survey showed that parents were most enthusiastic about the proposed reading check for all children in Year 1. 73% of parents surveyed supported the idea.

3.8 A recent YouGov poll found that 52% of people support the proposal of introducing a reading assessment in Year 1, compared to 27% opposing the idea.

## How we will develop the screening check

4.1 Taking into account the consultation responses, findings from the pre-trialling and the academic evidence, we propose to continue to develop the phonics screening check. The screening check will have the same purpose as set out in the consultation document.

### Purpose

- The Year 1 phonics screening check will confirm whether individual pupils have learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard.
- Pupils who have not reached this standard at the end of Year 1 should receive appropriate support from their school to ensure they can improve their phonic decoding skills, and will then have the opportunity to retake the screening check.

### Impact of the screening check

- The screening check should identify children at the end of Year 1 who have not yet learned appropriate phonic decoding skills. These children should then receive additional support to ensure they can improve their reading skills.
- The Government wants to encourage schools to pursue a rigorous phonics programme for all children at the start of primary school.
- By promoting the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics and identifying pupils who need extra support, it is hoped that introducing the screening check will lead to an increase in the number of children able to read for enjoyment and understanding, and access the rest of the curriculum.

4.2 Through the piloting we will determine whether the check can be reported in two levels. If reported in two levels, the check would show which pupils are able to segment and blend the most common grapheme-phoneme correspondences in shorter words, as well as the number of pupils who have reached an appropriate level in phonic decoding for the end of Year 1.

## **The focus on phonic decoding**

4.3 The check will continue to assess only decoding using phonics because this is the crucial skill which enables children to become effective readers.

4.4 The evidence shows phonics is a more effective teaching strategy than using picture prompts and other cueing systems to help children read individual words. Children may be able to read some simple books using other cueing strategies by developing their memory of whole words, but they will not be able to apply this approach to more complex books when they need to read many unfamiliar words. Children who learn to read using strategies other than phonics can find they make slower than expected progress in Key Stage 2. They can find spelling difficult and struggle when they try to read more challenging books.

4.5 We do not underestimate the importance of teaching wider reading skills. All children should be taught to read for meaning and pleasure throughout primary school. The evidence shows phonics teaching is most effective when taught as part of a language-rich curriculum. Introducing a check of phonic decoding in Year 1 does not mean that schools should delay teaching children wider literacy and comprehension skills.

4.6 However, we will not include comprehension in this assessment. Phonics is a necessary component of wider reading skills, and teaching phonics promotes rather than undermines language comprehension. Assessing only phonic decoding will help to limit the assessment requirements at the start of primary school. Key Stage 1 assessments will continue to cover wider aspects of reading and writing.

## **The benefits of the screening check**

4.7 We agree with respondents to the consultation that teacher assessment of phonics is crucial. Teachers should continue to track their pupils' progress throughout reception and Year 1, so that they can target their teaching appropriately and intervene as early as possible with pupils who are struggling.

4.8 We believe that this check provides considerable benefits for all schools, including those with good teacher assessment practices and a proper focus on phonics as part of a language rich curriculum. The benefits of the check for these schools are:

- The screening check will provide a standardised assessment of children's decoding skills. This can be combined with existing teacher assessments to create a more complete and reliable picture of each child's ability. A one-on-one summative assessment towards the end of a Year is a useful element of a rounded assessment process. In many cases the check will confirm the judgements of good quality teacher assessment. This will provide helpful reassurance to parents and teachers throughout the school.
- The check will provide a national benchmark for phonic decoding, which will allow schools to judge their performance. We know that many schools (including those working with a high proportion of pupils with English as an Additional Language or in disadvantaged areas) successfully teach over 90% of their children to be secure in Phase 5 of Letters and Sounds or equivalent at the end of Year 1. Providing the national data from the check will help schools to consider whether they are setting sufficiently high expectations for their pupils. As a result, some schools may review their teaching of phonics which will help more children to become effective readers early in their education.
- The check will provide information about individual pupils' knowledge of phonic decoding. The check is not long enough to be diagnostic in itself, but teachers involved in the pre-trialling found that the materials quickly showed up areas of phonic knowledge where pupils may be struggling, for example split digraphs or particular vowel digraphs. They can combine this information with the teacher assessment data or additional diagnostic tests to decide the areas in which children need extra support. In cases where a number of pupils in a class are struggling with the same elements of decoding, teachers may wish to look again about how that skill was taught to the class in order to develop their quality first teaching. For example, pupils across several classes in one of the pre-trial schools struggled with the a-e split digraph in the check, and so the school has reviewed how this element of decoding was taught.
- We will provide some signposting and evidence documents about effective interventions, which teachers can use to help plan next steps for their pupils if they wish.
- There will be a retest to confirm that children who were struggling at the end of Year 1 have caught up in Year 2. Analysing the data from the retest will help schools to consider the effectiveness of their interventions for pupils and plan accordingly. It will also provide schools with a reliable measure to track all their children until they are reading efficiently. We



will provide more detail about how the repeat administration of the check after the piloting this Summer.

## The design of the screening check

4.9 ***In the pilot we will continue to ask each pupil to read 40 items with a teacher, which will be a mix of real words and non-words.*** This is the most effective way to design a reliable check of phonic decoding, which is the purpose of this check.

4.10 Non-words used will be new to all pupils, and so there will be no unintended bias based on visual memory of words or vocabulary knowledge (for example pupils with EAL may have a smaller vocabulary and so find reading real words more difficult). Non-words are an established assessment method in many schools, for example they are included in 'Letters and Sounds'. The evidence from the pre-trialling confirms non-words are not confusing for pupils.

4.11 We acknowledge the concerns about the use of non-words expressed in the consultation. Through the piloting we will check that non-words perform reliably as a means of assessing phonic decoding for all pupil groups. We will also review whether there should be a majority of real words in the check in light of evidence from the technical piloting.

4.12 The pre-trialling suggests the screening check will take 2-3 minutes per pupil to administer. Given this, we think 40 items is a manageable length for pupils and teachers. We will determine exactly how many questions are required to generate a reliable result through the piloting this Summer; if fewer questions are necessary, then we will consider reducing the number of words in the check.

4.13 The majority of consultation respondents thought that teachers should administer the check, which will help to inform their teaching, and so we will stipulate that only teachers can administer the check.

4.14 ***We will make some adjustments to the proposals set out in the consultation document to ensure the check is manageable for schools to administer.*** Based on the responses to the public consultation, we propose to allow a window of one week for the check to take place, and to produce one check to cover the whole window rather than one check per day. We also propose to allow more than one teacher in each school to administer the assessment. This will allow large schools sufficient flexibility to organise the check without disrupting their Key Stage 1 teaching. Schools will be responsible for ensuring that their administration of the check is consistent and fair for all pupils and that it produces accurate and reliable results which can be compared to national outcomes.

4.15 We will support teachers to score the check consistently, but we have adjusted some of the arrangements to allow teachers greater scope to use their professional judgement. There will not be a time limit for each response. This will ensure children do not feel pressurised taking the check, and teachers can use their judgement to decide when to move a child onto the next word in the check. We agree with the majority of respondents that self-correction should be encouraged because it demonstrates good reading processes. Where a child immediately self-corrects their response answer they will receive credit for reading the word.

4.16 These rules mean the check will not assess fluency of decoding. The feedback from the pre-trialling suggests it is not essential to assess fluency as part of this check, although teachers will continue to be interested in fluency as part of children's wider reading development.



## The use of data from the screening check

4.17 Based on the responses to this consultation we can confirm that the results of the check will not be published on a school by school basis in Performance Tables. This will ensure that the check does not become a high stakes test.

4.18 One purpose of this check is to drive good quality, systematic teaching of phonics in schools, and so we think providing information through RAISEOnline for use by other educational professionals, including schools, LAs and Ofsted is important. Many respondents argued the data at school level needed to be seen in context, and the characteristics of the pupils entering the school should be considered. Education professionals are well placed to interpret the information based on context without setting lower expectations for more disadvantaged pupils.

4.19 The check should also allow schools to benchmark their performance in the teaching of phonics, so that they can drive improvements where necessary and set suitable expectations for their pupils. National and local authority statistics allow schools to consider their performance in this way, and so we propose to publish national and local authority level data.

4.20 Parents have a right to know how their child's school is performing. Phonic decoding is the skill which underpins successful reading, but we recognise that it is not an end in itself, and that schools should be teaching other aspects of reading. We will make this clear in all communications to parents, and schools will also want to put information about decoding from this check in context for their parents.

## Test specification

4.21 The detailed description of how the screening check will be designed and administered is contained in a specification document, which will be available on the Department's website before the end of the Spring term 2010. This document applies for the piloting of the check, but we anticipate some changes based on the piloting of the check this Summer, and the associated validity and reliability studies.

## Next Steps

5.1 We will pilot the screening check in a representative sample of approximately 300 schools this summer. This will generate important data about the reliability of the check, and allow standardised checks to be developed for subsequent years.

## Arrangements for piloting

5.2 The pilot offers the opportunity to continue to gather evidence about the opinions of headteachers, teachers, pupils and parents. We will be considering how teachers respond to the check, having worked with the assessment materials, through an independent evaluation and monitoring of the pilot.

5.3 In the pilot we will pay particular attention to pupils with EAL and pupils with SEN (Special Educational Needs). We will make sure at least 1000 pupils with EAL participate in the pilot, so that we can reliably analyse how pupils in this group perform. We will also collect qualitative data around whether there are any issues for pupils with particular first languages.

5.4 We have been working with SEN specialists to ensure as many pupils as possible are able to access the check. We will make adjustments to the materials for pupils with different types of SEN, where necessary. For example, we will produce a version of the check in Grade 1 Braille and upload the materials to a secure website so schools can make any necessary adjustments.

5.5 We also propose to produce additional advice for teachers administering the screening check to pupils with different types of SEN, which they will be able to access where necessary. We will recommend that teachers administering the check seek advice from the SEN Coordinator (SENCo) where appropriate.

## **Further decisions to be informed by the piloting**

5.6 We will gather further evidence about the best way to develop the policy, to analyse alongside the consultation responses, in five areas:

- *Reporting the results from the check to parents* – Respondents raised important issues around how to explain the role of the phonics check in the context of wider reading development, and how to encourage parents to support their children to develop their reading skills. We will work with parents and teachers involved in the piloting to discuss how information from the check can be presented to parents most usefully, without burdening schools with complex reporting requirements.
- *Reporting pupils' performance on the check as one or two levels* – Respondents to the consultation were divided between those favouring a simple reporting system of whether pupils have reached the expected standard on the check, and those who thought that reporting two levels from the check would provide teachers and parents with more useful data. We will analyse the statistics from the pilot to determine whether we can report a reliable result of both Section 1 (graphemes which children tend to learn to decode before Year 1) and Section 2 (including more complex word structures, additional graphemes and some alternative pronunciations, which tend to be introduced to children during Year 1). This analysis will inform the final decision on this issue.
- *The timing of the screening check* – Consultation responses varied on this question. Some respondents thought that administering the check earlier in Year 1 would be most appropriate so that schools could identify children with difficulties and provide support as quickly as possible, whereas others argued that the check should take place right at the end of Year 1 so children had the maximum amount of time to secure their knowledge of alternative pronunciations and more complex graphemes. The piloting will take place in June as proposed, and we will consult on the exact dates for future screening checks.
- *The repeat administration of the check* - The consultation showed a range of opinion about how a repeat administration of the check should operate in Year 2. The re-check should help ensure as many pupils as possible have learnt how to decode using phonics, and help schools to consider the effectiveness of their interventions. We recognise that a repeat administration needs to be done sensitively so that children are supported in developing their reading skills.
- *Supporting schools to provide appropriate interventions for their pupils* – The responses to the consultation were clear that we should allow schools to determine the type of catch-up support they provide for their pupils who need extra help. We agree that

schools are best placed to make these decisions. Some respondents requested further evidence about effective catch-up interventions or signposting to different types of support, and we will explore this further with teachers involved in the piloting.

# **Annex A – Results of the public consultation**

## **Question by questions statistics**

**Do you agree that this screening check should be focused on phonic decoding?**

Yes: 28%  
No: 66%  
Not Sure: 6%:

**Do you agree that the screening check should be a maximum of 40 items?**

Yes: 46%  
No: 47%  
Not Sure: 7%

**Do you agree that the screening check should contain a mixture of words and non-words?**

Yes: 30%  
No: 64%  
Not Sure: 6%

**Are the different elements of phonic decoding knowledge introduced in the right section of the screening check?**

Yes: 39%  
No: 40%  
Not Sure: 21%

**Is mid-June the most appropriate time for this screening check to be administered?**

Yes: 34%  
No: 58%  
Not Sure: 8%

**Is it correct that this screening check should be administered by teachers?**

Yes: 59%  
No: 34%  
Not Sure: 7%

**Should only one teacher in each school administer the screening check?**

Yes: 22%  
No: 65%  
Not Sure: 13%

**Is providing video guidance to screening check administrators appropriate?**

Yes: 47%  
No: 42%  
Not Sure: 11%

**How long do you think the administration window should be?**

1 day: 1%  
2 - 3 days: 7%  
4 - 5 days: 38%  
Other: 44%  
Not sure: 9%

**Is it necessary to have a different screening check for each day of the administration window?**

Yes: 12%  
No: 78%  
Not Sure: 10%

**Do you agree that schools should decide on the appropriate catch-up support for each child?**

Yes: 88%  
No: 9%  
Not Sure: 3%

**Is it right that the repeat administration of the screening check should take place in the Autumn term?**

Yes: 29%  
No: 58%  
Not Sure: 13%

**Is 10 seconds long enough to be able to conclude that the child could not read the word?**

Yes: 38%  
No: 51%  
Not Sure: 11%

**Should some element of self-correction be allowed as part of this screening check?**

Yes: 91%  
No: 7%  
Not Sure: 2%

**Is this approach to scoring alternative pronunciations of graphemes appropriate?**

Yes: 42%  
No: 46%  
Not Sure: 12%

**Should the minimum requirement for reporting the results to parents be a simple recognition of whether the pupil has reached the expected level?**

Yes: 41%  
No: 49%  
Not Sure: 10%

**Should parents be told whether the pupil had reached the standard on each section of the screening check, even if this makes it longer?**

Yes: 28%  
No: 59%  
Not Sure: 13%

**Do you agree that it is reasonable to include the results in RAISEOnline?**

Yes: 20%  
No: 68%  
Not Sure: 12%

**Do you agree that parents should be informed about their school's performance?**

Yes: 34%  
No: 52%  
Not Sure: 14%

**Do you agree that school by school results should not be published in the Achievement and Attainment Tables?**

Yes: 88%  
No: 7%  
Not Sure: 5%

**Do you agree that national, regional and local authority level results should be published from this screening check?**

Yes: 18%  
No: 72%  
Not Sure: 10%

# Annex B – Report of the pre-trialling of phonics screening check materials

## Summary

1.1 Almost all pupils and teachers thought that the screening check materials were appropriate. The feedback which we have received from the pre-trialling indicates that we should take forward many aspects of this assessment to the main trialling in the Summer. The technical analysis of responses shows that the questions in the check performed well, and it was possible to differentiate between ability groups.

1.2 On the basis of the pre-trialling, we propose to conduct further work in some areas:

- We propose to include some practice items for each pupil to read, which would not be scored by the teacher. The practice items could be two letter words, and simple real and pseudo three letter words. This will introduce the assessment method to pupils and allow the vast majority of children, including those with lower abilities, to access at least some aspect of the screening check.
- We propose to consider detailed aspects of the scoring system further, and then provide more precise instructions for teachers so that they are supported to introduce the materials for the screening check and score the responses in a consistent way.
- We propose to carry out further investigation and reliability studies to ensure that the screening check materials are appropriate for pupils with EAL and those with SEN wherever possible.

1.3 A pilot with a representative sample of approximately 300 schools will take place this June. The pre-trialling provided valuable information to help shape the pilot. The findings from the pre-trial are from a relatively small number of schools, and we will continue to gather evidence about the check from this summer's technical piloting, which will inform roll out plans.



## Introduction

### Purpose of the pre-trial

2.1 The purpose of the pre-trial was to understand how the screening check functions with pupils and to understand any issues that arise through the administration. The pre-trial was not attempting to determine whether the pupils involved are working at an appropriate level for the end of Year 1 or to make any judgements about the quality of phonics teaching in the schools involved.

### Information to be gathered

2.2 In advance of the pre-trial, we determined that we would gather evidence in response to the following questions:

- How long does it take to administer the screening check for children who teachers think are at the appropriate standard?
- How long does it take to administer the screening check for children who teachers think are not at the appropriate standard?
- How do teachers handle the situation where a child struggles with the screening check?
- How long do children take to read each word and how long before the teacher knows that they can't read it?
- How do pupils respond to non-words?
- Is the use of pictures with non-words necessary or helpful?
- Were there any specific issues for children with EAL?
- Were there any specific issues for children with SEN?
- Were there any specific issues relating to pupil accent?
- How many children self corrected during the screening check?
- What did the children think of the experience?
- What did the teacher think of the experience?
- What guidance did the teacher think would be required to train teachers to administer the screening check?

### Profile of schools taking part

2.3 Pre-trial visits took place to 16 schools. In almost all cases, the schools were chosen because there was evidence of good practice in the teaching of phonics in these schools. The pre-trial schools had a range of characteristics (though not statistically representative) in terms of levels of deprivation, number of students with EAL, and rural/ urban location. 271 pupils were involved, including 85 with EAL and 44 with SEN.

## Qualitative evidence gathered from the pre-trial

### How did different pupil groups respond to the check?

#### 3.1 *Were there any specific issues for children with EAL?*

There were 85 children with EAL in this pilot. Pupils with EAL responded to this check in a very similar way to the rest of the cohort, with an average score of 28.9 out of 40, compared to 29.5

for the whole cohort. In the whole cohort, pupils performed 6% better on real words than non-words in Section 1 and 5% better on section 2, but this difference was much less marked for pupils with EAL (4% on Section 1 and 1% on Section 2). This may be because the pupils in this group tend to have a smaller vocabulary, and so more of the real word test items appeared as non-words until the pupil had decoded them.

It should be noted that the children with EAL in the pre-trial were concentrated in a fairly small number of schools, and with these cluster effects and a small sample we will need to carry out further work to confirm these findings.

### *3.2 Were there any specific issues for children with SEN?*

There were 44 pupils with SEN involved in the trial. The number of pupils with SEN involved was too small to draw any firm conclusions, particularly because pupils with different types of SEN will respond to the test materials in different ways. For example, in the pre-trial we saw the need to make adjustments for pupils with autism and pupils with hearing impairments, but no pupils with visual impairments were in our sample.

In general, pupils with SEN performed less well, with an average score of 18.3. Some pupils with SEN did have to be stopped by their teacher during Section 1 of the test, although others successfully completed the check.

This suggests that further work will be necessary to make appropriate adjustments to the screening check materials. We have started discussion with a wide range of organisations representing pupils with special educational needs, and we will make reasonable adjustments to the screening check materials and provide additional guidance for teachers as necessary.

### *3.3 How do teachers handle the situation where a child struggles with the screening check?*

10 children were stopped before completing the screening check. In other cases pupils got almost all of the answers on Section 2 of the test incorrect, but were allowed to complete the check by their teacher.

The teacher was encouraged to use their judgement to decide if it was necessary to stop the test. Observers reported no instances of teachers stopping the check inappropriately.

An encouraging number of low ability children were able to make it through to the end of the check. Teachers allowed some children to continue because of their knowledge of the child - for example they could be confident that a particular child would not be discouraged by the experience. Having non-words and uncommon real words in the test also means that children are often unaware when they have read an item incorrectly. In some cases, low ability pupils displayed knowledge which was surprising to their teacher by reading words in section 2 correctly, including 'theme', and 2 syllable words such as 'extra' and 'basket'.

Teachers generally felt that having two sections allowed them to stop the check more easily, and having fewer words on each card would allow them to stop the check at more points. Some teachers would have welcomed additional guidance from the Department about when to stop the check.

## **Response to non-words**

### *3.4 How do pupils respond to non-words?*

The non-words were well received by most schools involved in the pre-trial. Teachers recognised that non-words assessed only phonic decoding, whereas real words could be read based on sight memory.

Children were generally unconcerned about being asked to read non-words. Some schools already use this approach to assessing phonics, and so reading non-words was a familiar activity. Children regularly said that they were reading non-words 'by sounding them out', which is the strategy we would hope to see pupils adopt for any unfamiliar words. Teachers pointed out that all words are in effect non-words when a child first encounters them, and children only recognise new words as real once they have decoded them.

Almost all teachers agreed with using non-words. Teachers thought that some individual non-words could be unreliable because pupils attempted to 'make them into a real word' to match their existing vocabulary. For example, it was relatively common for pupils read 'jound' as 'joined'. Care should be taken when choosing non-word test items so that they don't appear to invite this type of error. However, this type of mistake could show that the pupil had not systematically decoded the word.

Statistically pupils performed less well on non-words, with an average score 6% lower. Given the positive feedback from pupils about non-words, this lower performance probably cannot be explained by children struggling to understand this assessment approach. More likely, pupils are able to use a range of strategies to read real words, including their sight memory, which would help pupils with limited knowledge of phonics to read the item correctly.

This could be an argument in favour of using only non-words in the screening check. However, teachers were clear that some real words were necessary to give the test credibility for parents, teachers and pupils, and most felt that an even split was appropriate.

A number of children, including mid or high ability pupils, did make a surprising mistake on the cvc non-words, despite their simple structure. This could be because children on this age sometimes make unnecessary mistakes or the font used was unfamiliar, but it may also have been because some pupils needed to get used to the idea of decoding non-words. A significant number of teachers argued that a small number of practice items would be helpful and would allow children to understand the nature of the assessment.

A number of teachers also felt that starting with real words (either as pre-test items or as the first items on the test) would help to ease some children into the check. Simple practice items may also help some pupils with SEN, who would be able to attempt more parts of the assessment, even if they were not yet able to decode complex words.

### *3.5 Is the use of pictures with non-words necessary or helpful?*

The non-words at the start of each section were accompanied by a picture of a monster, and teachers were encouraged to tell children that the non-word was the name of a type of monster. This method helps children to understand they are reading an unfamiliar word.

Most teachers thought the pictures helped to explain the non-words, and ensured that children decoded the non-words properly rather than trying to link them to their existing vocabulary. In a small number of cases teachers felt that the pictures could be distracting and not all the teachers explained why they were there. There were suggestions that all of the non-words could

be colour coded or have a picture so that it was absolutely clear which test items were non-words.

Children almost all responded positively to the picture prompts; they gave an extra element of enjoyment and interest to the activity.

## Scoring the screening check

### 3.6 *How many children self corrected during the screening check?*

Approximately 1.9% of responses were self corrections. Where the self-correction is immediate, teachers thought that the response should be marked correct. In some cases, children self-corrected after a delay, possibly in response to unconscious signals from their teacher. Requiring an immediate self-correction could help to minimize this effect.

In some cases pupils read the word correctly in the first instance, then self-corrected to give the wrong answer. Teachers did not score this type of response in the same way, and so further guidance is required.

### 3.7 *How many children sounded out the word?*

Pupils sounding out the word rather than reading the word immediately was relatively common. Some lower ability pupils adopted this approach right through the test and teachers regularly encouraged their pupils to 'sound out the words if you can't read them easily.' Teachers recognised that this approach is different from automatically reading a word, but tended to think that a pupil deserved credit if they decoded and also blended the word successfully. This approach was also similar to how they would encourage pupils to approach a new word in a lesson.

Initial feedback suggests that automatically reading the word is above the appropriate standard for Year 1, and so we would look to give credit for words which a pupil read correctly after sounding them out.

Some teachers argued that the scoring system should allow pupils who read an item automatically to receive 2 marks, and pupils who self-correct or sound out an item to receive 1 mark. However, using this scoring system for a test of this type would make the results less reliable.

### 3.8 *How long do children take to read each word and how long before the teacher knows that they can't read it?*

Almost all children took less than 10 seconds to attempt a word. 10 to 20 seconds is sometimes needed if children approach the word by sounding out each phoneme and then attempting to blend the word. Teachers generally felt that pupils should be given 'as long as they need' to decode without time pressure, particularly children with some types of SEN, such as children with a stammer.

### 3.9 *Were there any specific issues relating to pupil accent?*

In general, teachers were familiar with any regional accents of their pupils, and so were well placed to decide whether to mark responses correct or incorrect. For example, there were no issues reported with pronunciations of the words 'frast' with a long or a short 'a'.

Some pronunciations used by pupils with EAL posed more difficulties. For example, some children with an Indian background pronounced 'vap' with a 'w' sound at the start of a word. Teachers were divided about whether this type of pronunciation should be accepted, and this will require detailed guidance to make sure the check is administered consistently.

### *3.10 Were there any issues relating to pupil's pronunciation?*

'Thrill' was included as a test item partly to see whether pronunciation would pose difficulties for administrators. Teachers tended to accept pronunciations including an 'f' or 'w' sound at the start of the word, if they felt the pupil had decoded the word correctly. This would fit with the purpose of the screening check to assess phonic decoding only, not other aspects of reading. This could be an area where teachers' professional judgement is required.

Pupils sometimes read the item too quietly for the administrator to hear. In these instances, teachers asked the pupil to repeat their response, but teachers recognised this could, in effect, give some pupils a second chance. This issue may be unavoidable, but guidance could remind teachers to ask pupils to read loudly before the start of the check.

There were some occasions when pupils used an unusual but acceptable pronunciation for a non-word without gaining credit. For example, reading 'vead' to rhyme with 'head' should have received credit, as should reading 'jound' to rhyme with 'wound'. We will produce a list of phonetically acceptable responses to each test item for the technical trialling.

## **Teacher guidance**

### *3.11 What guidance did the teacher think would be required to train teachers to administer the screening check?*

Unprompted, several teachers asked for some very precise written guidance about how to introduce the test and how to score individual pronunciations. Teachers felt that more precise guidance would be useful in the following areas:

- A list of acceptable pronunciations.
- How to introduce the non-words.
- What prompts/ encouragement are allowed for pupils between items in the check.
- What to say if a teacher cannot hear a response.
- When to move a child onto the next test item if they are struggling.
- When it might be appropriate to stop a child from continuing with the check.
- If there are any circumstances in which pupils can be allowed a second chance on an item in the check.

## **Length of the screening check**

### *3.12 How long does it take to administer the screening check for children who the teachers think are at the appropriate standard?*

High ability children assessed by their teacher at above the appropriate standard were able to complete this test quickly. Typically they took between 1 and 2 minutes. In some cases, high ability pupils made surprising mistakes because they rushed through the test.

### *3.13 How long does it take to administer the screening check for children who the teachers think are not at the appropriate standard?*

In the vast majority of cases the screening check took less than 5 minutes to administer. Only one or two pupils per school took longer than 5 minutes. Almost all pupils were able to concentrate for the 40 test items, although pupils on the autistic spectrum or with behavioural issues might require rest breaks.

Children completing the check in an average of 2-3 minutes, which suggests the check will be a manageable length for schools to organise for their whole cohort. The manageability of the test is also influenced by how the school organises the administration. Logistical points, such as the distance of the room where the assessment takes place and the classroom, had a significant effect on the number of checks which could be completed per hour. How the teacher explained the concept of pseudo words also has a significant impact on timings. A simple script here may help teachers to administer the screening check efficiently.

## **Overall feedback**

### **What did children think of the experience?**

4.1 Children were almost all positive about the experience. Children were content to read pseudo words, and some children enjoyed having the monster picture prompts. When asked about the check, many children said it was 'easy' or 'only a little difficult at the end'. Most low ability children responded in this way, which suggests that children were not discouraged by having to sound out words or not being able to read several of the test items. Some had been a little nervous in advance of the screening check (perhaps partly because there was an observer present), but were reassured by the actual experience.

### **What did the teacher think of the experience?**

4.2 The general response was positive, and only a small minority of schools expressed significant misgivings about the assessment approach.

4.3 Some other points were raised by teachers which have not been covered so far in this document:

- Some teachers discussed with the observer whether this check would help to inform their teaching. In most cases schools in this pre-trial had good teacher assessment practices, and so the results of the screening check confirmed their existing opinions. Most teachers thought this confirmation, using a standardised test, would be useful. Some teachers identified pupils who may have been good readers, but this check usefully revealed that their phonic decoding was below the standard they expected. Although the test is not diagnostic for individual pupils, teachers could identify particular grapheme-phoneme correspondences which were difficult for their whole class. For example, one teacher identified that the school should revisit their teaching of the 'oi' and 'ou' digraphs based on the responses to this assessment.
- Some teachers raised a concern about the use of data from this check. They felt it was very important that the data was not used to create league tables. They pointed out that the pupils could perform differently on a given day (for example, some pupils tended to rush through the check), and this should not have an undue impact on a school. Teachers who raised this concern were generally content for the results to be included

on RAISEOnline to inform professional conversations.

## Structure and difficulty of the check

5.1 The average score on the screening check was 29.5 out of 40. There is nothing particular in the data that would imply that the structure of the check is inappropriate. Although some words were relatively difficult, this was usually compensated by the usefulness of these words in discriminating between high and low performing pupils.

### Structure of the check

5.2 The orthographical structure of the items in the check needs to be finalised. Item level analysis of the responses in the pre-trial shows that words with vowel digraphs and words with split digraphs were most useful in differentiating between higher and lower ability pupils. We would therefore want to retain some words with these structures in the check to make it reliable.

5.3 In conjunction with phonics experts and teachers, we will consider further:

- The balance between items with digraphs and items with split digraphs.
- The balance between items with consonant clusters and items with vowel digraphs.

### Difficulty of the check

5.4 In advance of the pre-trial some phonics experts suggested that the items in the check could be too difficult for pupils at the end of Year 1. Most teachers taking part in the pre-trial thought the level of difficulty of the test was pitched reasonably well. Two schools questioned whether there was sufficient stretch for the more able pupils in the test, and wanted the standard set so they 'had something to aim for'. A minority of teachers thought the test was difficult, particularly some individual items in Section 2, although they agreed this could be addressed by setting a relatively low standard. It should be noted that the pre-trialling took place with pupils in Year 2, who should have improved their phonic decoding skills since the end of Year 1.

5.5 The differentiating effect of the more complex words suggests that they need to be included in the check. While retaining a wide range of orthographical structures in the check, if necessary, we should be able to make changes so that the check is not too hard for Year 1 pupils. For example, 'theme' was a difficult item, partly because the word was not in many children's oral vocabulary and it could be confused with 'them'. Another word with the same structure may have a similar differentiating effect without being difficult for so many pupils. We will explore this further in the technical trialling, before constructing the screening check for use in 2012.



## Annex C – What is the research evidence on phonics?

This note summarises research evidence on the use of phonics for teaching literacy, with a focus on reading. It also looks at children with literacy difficulties, at children with English as an Additional Language and at children with Special Educational Needs and/or dyslexia.

### Key findings

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Systematic phonics                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There has been a large body of research evidence regarding systematic phonics; it concludes that this is the most effective method for teaching literacy for all children.</li><li>• There is sound evidence from reviews of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) that systematic phonics instruction has a statistically significant positive effect on reading accuracy (Torgerson et al, 2006).</li><li>• There is a considerable amount of evidence on the effect of systematic synthetic phonics, and much less evidence on systematic analytic phonics (National Reading Panel, 2000a and b; Torgerson et al, 2006).</li><li>• There is sound evidence that systematic synthetic phonics programmes produce greater growth in reading than comparison programmes, and this is especially effective for younger, at-risk readers (National Reading Panel, 2000b).</li><li>• The teaching of phonics is most effective when combined with a language-rich curriculum to develop children's positive attitudes towards literacy (Torgerson et al, 2006; Rose, 2006; Ofsted, 2010).</li><li>• There is evidence that children should be taught using well-developed programmes that integrate curriculum, pedagogy and extensive professional development in order to make progress (Slavin et al, 2009).</li></ul> |
| Children with English as an Additional language (EAL) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There is limited evidence available on the effectiveness of phonics for children with English as an additional language (EAL); a need for more research in this area has been identified (Purewal, 2008).</li></ul>  |
| Children with literacy difficulties                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Literacy interventions for pupils with literacy difficulties can be effective, and evidence suggests that systematic phonics teaching within a broad and rich language curriculum enables both normally-developing children and those at risk of failure to make better progress in reading accuracy (Brooks, 2007).</li></ul>   |
| Children with   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There is evidence that phonics-based interventions are effective for teaching children with dyslexic and specific</li></ul>  |

dyslexia                      learning difficulties to read (Rose, 2009; Singleton, 2009).  
and / or  
Special  
Educational  
Needs  
(SEN)

## Definitions

There are several ways in which phonics can be taught. These are outlined below<sup>1</sup>:

**Systematic phonics:** refers to the teaching of letter-sound relationships in an explicit, organised and sequenced fashion, as opposed to incidentally or on a ‘when-needed’ basis.

**Synthetic phonics:** refers to an approach associated with the teaching of reading in which phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters) are pronounced in isolation and blended together (synthesised). For example, children are taught to take a single-syllable word such as *cat* apart into its three letters, pronounce a phoneme for each letter in turn, and blend the phonemes together to form a word.

**Analytic phonics:** refers to an approach associated with the teaching of reading in which the phonemes associated with particular graphemes are not pronounced in isolation. Children identify (analyse) the common phoneme in a set of words in which each word contains the phoneme under study. For example, teacher and pupils discuss how the following words are alike: *pat*, *park*, *push* and *pen*.

**Analogy phonics:** is a type of analytic phonics in which children analyse phonic elements according to the phonograms in the word. A phonogram is composed of the vowel and all the sounds that follow it, such as *–ake* in the word *cake*. Children use these phonograms to learn about “word families” for example *cake*, *make*, *bake*, *fake*.

**Embedded phonics:** refers to an approach to the teaching of reading in which phonics forms one part of a whole language programme. Embedded phonics differs from other methods in that the instruction is always in the context of literature rather than in separate lessons, and the skills to be taught are identified opportunistically rather than systematically.

## Systematic reviews of the research evidence

There have been several systematic reviews of research on phonics teaching: Ehri et al. (2001; 2003), Camilli et al. (2003), Torgerson and Brooks (2005) and Torgerson, Hall and Brooks (2006), each looking at the evidence on the impact of teaching phonics. Slavin et al (2009) also looked at the effectiveness of several reading programmes. These are each referred to in the following evidence.

The National Reading Panel was established in United States in 1997 by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to ‘assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read’. The Panel reviewed experimental and quasi-experimental studies to answer seven main research questions including the effect of phonemic awareness instruction on reading achievement, fluency and reading comprehension. In relation to phonics instruction, it concluded that

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions taken from National Literacy Trust website – May 2010

systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for pupils in pre-school to the end of primary school and for pupils having difficulty learning to read. It also found that systematic synthetic phonics instruction had a positive and significant effect on disabled readers' reading skills (National Reading Panel, 2000a; 2000b). Detailed findings are presented below in the relevant subsections.

Subsequent analyses of the National Reading Panel studies have been conducted by Ehri et al (2001) and Camilli et al (2003). Camilli et al. (2003) aimed to replicate the results of Ehri et al. (2001) using largely the same studies, to check whether the previous reviewers had performed the calculations correctly. They suggested that the greater effect identified in Ehri et al.'s (2001) review may have been due to the reviewers not fully taking into account differences between the studies, and the fact that some pupils who received phonics may also have received elements of whole-language approaches. This may have resulted in an artificially high estimate of the effect of phonics.

In England, Torgerson and Brooks (2005) and Torgerson, Brooks and Hall (2006) have conducted systematic reviews on the use of phonics for the teaching of reading and spelling.

## Background

Phonics involves connecting the sounds of spoken English with letters or groups of letters. For example, that the sound 'k' can be represented by *c*, *k*, *ck* or *ch* spellings. Phonics also involves teaching them to blend the sounds of letters together to produce approximate pronunciations of unknown words (National Literacy Trust website –May 2010). The connections between letter patterns and sounds are learned. In this way phonics enables people to use individual sounds to construct words.

For example, when taught the sounds for the letters *t*, *p*, *a* and *s*, one can build up the words "tap", "pat", "pats", "taps" and "sat".

## Main findings

Much recent research concentrates on the best way to teach phonics rather than looking at phonics compared to the whole word approach<sup>2</sup>. It is generally agreed that phonics is the most effective method used to teach reading.

## Systematic phonics and the teaching of reading

There is sound evidence that systematic phonics instruction has significant benefits for pupils in primary education and for pupils with difficulty in learning to read (National Reading Panel, 2000a; 2000b; Ehri et al, 2001; Camilli et al, 2003).

There is sound evidence that specific systematic<sup>3</sup> phonics programmes are all more effective to teach pupils to read than non-systematic phonics programmes or teaching that doesn't include phonics, and systematic phonics instruction helps pupils regardless of their socio-economic status (National Reading Panel, 2000a; 2000b).

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<sup>2</sup> The whole word approach is a method to teach reading by introducing words to pupils as a whole without analysis of their subparts.

<sup>3</sup> This includes synthetic, analytic etc.

Overall, the evidence concludes that systematic phonics instruction within a broad literacy curriculum has a statistically significant positive effect on reading accuracy for normally developing children and for children at risk of reading failure (Torgerson, Brooks and Hall, 2006). When systematic phonics instruction is combined with language activities and individual tutoring it can have an additive effect and may triple the effect of phonics alone (Camilli et al, 2003).

Recent inspection evidence from a sample of twelve primary schools which were deemed as very effective in teaching reading suggests that the concentrated and systematic use of phonics is key to their success; this is based on high-quality and expert teaching that gives pupils the opportunity to apply what they have learnt through reading, writing and comprehension of what they are reading. Children participate actively in their learning and talk and listen in a wide range of contexts so that they become familiar with sounds, the meaning of words, stories and books (Ofsted, 2010).

A recent review on the effectiveness of reading programmes also concluded that focussing on phonics solely is not enough to improve pupils' reading skills; teaching of phonics should be accompanied by innovative teaching practices that engage pupils in exciting lessons and ask them to practise their new skills with their teachers and classmates, or co-operative learning methods where pupils work in groups. Children should be taught using well-developed programmes that integrate curriculum, pedagogy and extensive professional development. The review concluded that what is important for pupils' progress are approaches that bring in a change into teachers' and pupils' daily routine (Slavin et al, 2009).

#### *Reading accuracy*

There is strong evidence that systematic phonics teaching is associated with better progress in reading accuracy, across all ability levels. The evidence found no statistically significant difference between the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction for reading accuracy for normally-developing children and for children at risk of reading failure (Torgerson, Brooks and Hall, 2006).

#### *Reading comprehension*

The evidence is inconclusive on whether systematic phonics has an impact on pupils' reading comprehension, with findings from the National Reading Panel showing that it improves pupils' comprehension skills in kindergarten and in 1<sup>st</sup> grade (but not for older pupils) (National Reading Panel 2000b; Ehri et al, 2001), whereas evidence from Torgerson et al (2006) didn't find a statistically significant effect. The latter is based on four studies.

#### *Spelling*

The evidence is mixed on whether systematic phonics has an impact on pupils' spelling, with findings from the National Reading Panel showing that it helps the spelling for pupils in kindergarten and in 1<sup>st</sup> grade (but not for older pupils) (National Reading Panel 2000b; Ehri et al, 2001), whereas evidence from Torgerson et al (2006) did not find an impact on pupils' spelling.

#### *How should phonics be delivered?*

Systematic phonics instruction is effective when delivered through tutoring, through small groups and through teaching classes of pupils (National Reading Panel, 2000b).

#### *When should phonics be introduced?*

Evidence shows that phonics instruction is more effective when introduced to pupils not yet reading, in kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup> grade (National Reading Panel, 2000b). Phonics instruction

improves reading ability more than non-phonics not only among beginning readers but also among normally progressing readers above 1<sup>st</sup> grade and older readers with reading difficulties (Ehri et al, 2001). In England, evidence from Evangelou et al (2009) concluded that deciding on when is the most appropriate time to introduce children to phonics instruction should be a matter for the practitioner; this is because some children between the ages of four and five may not have the oral language abilities and capacity for phonics instruction, even though pupils benefit in general from phonics instruction at that age.

## Synthetic versus analytic phonics

There is a debate in the academic community about the best approach to teaching phonics e.g. whether synthetic phonics is better than analytic and vice-versa.

There is a considerable amount of evidence on the effectiveness of systematic synthetic phonics, and much less evidence on systematic analytic phonics: the National Reading Panel database included 43 treatment-control comparisons that taught synthetic phonics to the treatment groups, 11 studies that used phonics treatments emphasizing larger subunits for blending words, two comparisons that combined both types of programmes, and ten comparisons that fit neither category, referred to as miscellaneous. In the meta-analysis, effect sizes of the three larger sets of phonics types were compared. The analysis concluded that systematic synthetic phonics programmes produced stronger growth in reading than control programmes in most of the different reader groups.

Likewise, 19 out of 20 RCTs included in the Torgerson et al review (2006) looked at synthetic phonics versus another approach: 16 RCTs compared synthetic phonics with whole language approaches, 'look-and-say' and 'onset-rime', and 3 RCTs compared synthetic with analytic phonics. The details of these 3 RCTs are presented below:

- Skailand study (1971) which compared synthetic with analytic phonics, using 'similar spelling' as analytic, and also synthetic with 'look-and-say'. The study found bigger effect sizes for the control groups i.e. children in the analytic phonics group performed better than the synthetic phonics group.
- Torgesen study (1999) which compared very explicit and intensive instruction in phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding called PASP (phonological awareness plus synthetic phonics) with systematic but less explicit instruction phonemic decoding, called embedded phonics. The study found bigger effects of synthetic phonics instruction over the grades (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade) than embedded phonics instruction.
- Johnston and Watson study (2004), known in United Kingdom as the Clackmannanshire study (Experiment 2). The study concluded that the synthetic phonics group read and spelt better than the analytic phonics group. Further details about the Clackmannanshire research are provided below.

Torgerson et al (2006) pooled together the effect sizes of the three RCTs and concluded that there is no strong RCT evidence that any one form of systematic phonics is more effective than any other. Overall, as noted above, the review concluded that systematic phonics has a positive effect on reading accuracy (*with most of the evidence based on synthetic phonics*).

## The Clackmannanshire research

The Clackmannanshire research aimed to compare the effectiveness of synthetic phonics with analytic phonics in teaching reading and spelling in around 300 children of Primary 1<sup>4</sup> in

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<sup>4</sup> This is equivalent of Year 1 in England.

Scotland. The research concluded that children who were taught with a synthetic phonics programme made more progress in reading and spelling than children in the other groups.

### *Methodology*

The research contained two experiments. Experiment 1 (Johnston & Watson, 2005) was a longitudinal Controlled Trial study where the children were allocated in three groups: a) synthetic phonics; b) analytic phonics and c) analytic phonics supplemented by a phonemic awareness training programme. Their progress was followed up for seven years. The allocation of children attempted to equate for differences in social class background; a complete match was not possible, therefore one group had to contain more children from less well-off backgrounds. The study began shortly after the children started school at around the age of five. Their performance in word reading, spelling and reading comprehension was tested using a range of tests. The programmes lasted for 16 weeks, the children receiving their interventions via scripted whole class programmes which lasted for 20 minutes a day. After two terms in these programmes, all of the children were taught by the synthetic phonics method, completing the programme by the end of Primary 1.

Experiment 2 (Johnston & Watson, 2004) aimed to control for speed of letter learning; it used randomisation in the allocation of children and therefore was a Randomised Controlled Trial study. It was conducted in 1995-96 and aimed to establish whether synthetic phonics is better than analytic, merely because letter sounds are taught at an accelerated pace. The children were randomised into 3 groups: a) synthetic phonics; b) accelerated letter training group (analytic); 'whole word' approach (look and say). They were seen twice a week for 15 minutes on 2 separate days, with two non-intervention days in between. They continued for 10 weeks, and there were 19 sessions per child in total. The children were extracted from class for extra tuition in addition to their normal reading programmes. There was no measurement of spelling. By the time of the last post-test, all children had learnt letter sounds in all position of words in their classroom programmes.

### *Results – Experiment 1*

- At the end of the experimental programmes, the synthetic phonics group read 7 months ahead of chronological age and 7 months ahead of the other two groups. They were also 7 months ahead of chronological age in spelling and spelt 8 to 9 months ahead of the other two groups.
- At the end of Primary 2, the girls who were taught synthetic phonics at the start of schooling read better than those initially taught by the standard analytic phonics approach; there was no difference in the scores for boys though.
- At the end of Primary 2, boys and girls who were taught synthetic phonics spelt better than the other two groups.
- Although boys and girls read words equally well in Primary 2, from Primary 3 to Primary 7 the boys performed significantly better than the girls. The boys performed better than the girls in spelling in Primaries 4, 6 and 7.
- In addition, the advantage for chronological age showed by the children in word reading and spelling was increasing over time: at the end of Primary 7, the word reading age for boys was 15.6 years and for girls 14.7 years (so, their reading advantage was 3.2 years). The spelling age for boys was 13.8 years and for girls 13.0 years (again, their spelling advantage was 3.2 years).
- Regarding attitudes, girls showed a more positive attitude to reading compared to boys, despite having lower word recognition skills. This is a finding supported by other research (e.g. Twist et al, 2007).

### *Results – Experiment 2*

- In ten weeks after the start of the intervention, children in the synthetic phonics groups performed better in word reading ability than children in the other two groups, who did not differ from each other.
- Three months after the conclusion of the intervention programme, children in the synthetic phonics group performed better than the accelerated letter learning and no-letter groups. The synthetic phonics group read more words correctly than the accelerated letter learning and no-letter groups, who did not differ from each other. The groups did not differ in letter sound knowledge.
- At the start of Primary 2 (nine months after the completion of the intervention programme), children in the synthetic phonics group performed better than the other two groups in word reading ability.

## Other evidence

A recent report by the Centre for Policy Studies, commissioned by the London Mayor, looked at the teaching of reading in London primary schools. The author visited several schools and spoke to teachers about the teaching and standards of reading. Drawing on her classroom observations and conversations, the author argues that the use of the child-led approach to learning in primary schools and the failure to use synthetic phonics repeatedly are responsible for the high proportions of pupils who do not achieve the expected levels in English assessments (Gross, 2010).

## The Rose Review

There has been considerable debate in the UK over the past few years as to how best to teach children to read, which culminated in an *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* led by Jim Rose in 2005 (final report published in 2006).

Although this review recommended that children are taught synthetic phonics at the first instance, it also placed phonics teaching firmly within a language-rich framework that fosters positive attitudes towards reading and a love of books (Clark and Rumbold, 2006).

The Review focused on: best practice in early reading and synthetic phonics<sup>5</sup>; how this relates to the National Literacy Strategy (NLS); how to support children with literacy difficulties; leadership and management factors; and cost-effectiveness.

In terms of the teaching of phonics, the Rose Review (2006) concluded that:

- High quality systematic phonics offers the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers;
- Phonic work is also 'essential' for the development of writing, especially spelling.
- Schools should focus on implementing high quality phonic work; *'It is implementing the principles which define high quality phonic work that should engage settings and schools, rather than debating entrenched views about less important aspects of phonics teaching'*.
- Phonic work should be taught within a broad and language-rich environment. This means a curriculum that engages children into meaningful discussion, generates interest,

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<sup>5</sup> The remit of the review was to look at early reading and synthetic phonics. Research evidence on systematic phonics is included in the review (the National Reading Panel analysis) as well as evidence from practitioners and lessons observations, which highlights the advantages of synthetic phonics for English-speaking children.



enjoyment and positive attitudes to literacy and the skills associated with it, including the importance of sharing and enjoying books with children.

## How does phonics work for pupils with literacy difficulties?

Overall, the evidence suggests that phonics instruction can be beneficial for children with literacy difficulties, as ordinary teaching is not enough for them.

As mentioned previously, systematic phonics instruction helps children of all ability: Torgerson and Brooks (2005) found that there was no statistically significant difference between the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction for reading accuracy for normally-developing children and for children at risk of reading failure.

Brooks (2007) conducted a review of the effectiveness of intervention schemes, examining what works for pupils with literacy difficulties. Brooks concluded that ordinary teaching or 'no literacy intervention' does not enable children with literacy difficulties to catch up.

In terms of phonics, Brooks (2007) concluded that '*work on phonological skills for reading should be embedded within a broad approach*', meaning that phonic teaching should be accompanied by graphic representation and reading for meaning. Brooks also advises that 'children with severe difficulties in phonological skills or using English as an additional language may need more stand alone phonics teaching to support their speaking and listening'.

Looking at systematic phonics specifically, Brooks (2007) cites Torgerson et al. (2006), who found that systematic phonics teaching within a broad and rich language curriculum enables both normally-developing children and those at risk of failure to make better progress in reading accuracy (word identification) than unsystematic or no phonics teaching. Brooks concludes that for greatest impact with struggling readers, therefore, '*work on phonological skills should be embedded within a broad approach*'.

Likewise, inspection evidence from a wide range of establishments<sup>6</sup> about effective teaching of literacy among disadvantaged<sup>7</sup> children found that teachers had high expectations for pupils' achievements in literacy and placed an emphasis on speaking and listening skills from an early age. The establishments adopted a rigorous and sequential approach to teach literacy and develop speaking and listening skills through systematic phonics. They assessed carefully children's progress and provided high-quality pastoral care to support children's learning (Ofsted, 2011).

## Children with dyslexia and / or Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Overall, the evidence suggests that phonics instruction can help children with reading difficulties.

Findings from the National Reading Panel in United States show that systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than non-phonics instruction in helping to prevent reading difficulties among 'at risk' children at kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade and in helping 'disabled

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<sup>6</sup> These included 45 early years registered providers, 61 primary and 37 secondary schools, 21 colleges, 16 independent training providers, 8 local authority providers of adult and community learning, and education provision in one prison and one young offender institution.

<sup>7</sup> These included pupils eligible for Free School Meals, looked-after children and White British boys from low-income households.

readers<sup>8</sup> of the same age groups improve their reading skills. However, the evidence reviewed by the study could not clarify why systematic phonics instruction did not help low-achieving readers<sup>9</sup> in 2<sup>nd</sup> through to 6<sup>th</sup> grades. The researchers however could not establish whether this particular finding is even reliable, and recommended further research to look at this issue (National Reading Panel, 2000b; Ehri et al, 2001).

Singleton (2009) reviewed studies in the US and UK which showed positive benefits of intensive phonological<sup>10</sup> based interventions for children with dyslexia and specific learning difficulties.

The review demonstrated that ‘secondary’<sup>11</sup> interventions that are beneficial for children with dyslexia have the following characteristics:

- The instructors have explicit training in phonological awareness;
- There is strong focus on phonological decoding and word-level work;
- Children, through supported and independent reading, move on to read progressively more difficult texts;
- Children receive instruction on comprehension strategies while reading texts;
- The instruction is systematic and intensive.

Systematic phonological secondary interventions were found to benefit children with reading difficulties in the long term. However, a small group of children (between 1.5% and 3%) did not reach the expected levels of improvement and required further help.

The review also found that tertiary<sup>12</sup> interventions, in the form of intensive phonological instruction can benefit children with dyslexia or learning disabilities (Singleton, 2009). The evidence demonstrated that children’s phonic decoding skills improved a lot but reading fluency tended to remain weak or poor.

Findings from the 2009 Rose review (about teaching children with dyslexia and literacy difficulties) also highlight that ‘intervention programmes which systematically prioritise phonological skills for reading and writing are effective for teaching children with dyslexia’ (Rose, 2009). Children with dyslexia benefit from teaching approaches that are ‘highly structured, systematic, ‘little and often’, using graphic representation, allowing time for reinforcement and encouraging generalisation (ibid).

## **Pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL)**

The majority of the research that has been conducted on the effectiveness of teaching phonics has been focused on first language learners. There is very little evidence as to whether this is an effective method for teaching English to pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). It has been found that sufficient evidence does not exist in terms of whether or not a

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<sup>8</sup> In US there are no SEN categories, so ‘disabled readers’ in US is one of the terms used to refer to children with reading difficulties.

<sup>9</sup> As they authors note, these are children with reading difficulties and possibly other cognitive difficulties explaining their low achievement.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Phonological skills’ consist of the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds in words (Rose, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Secondary interventions’ refer to individual or group intensive instruction to failing readers in the first 3-4 years of schooling. It does not refer to interventions in secondary schools (Singleton, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Tertiary interventions’ refer to the most intensive special education given to children from age 8-9 onwards and it usually takes the form of one to one (Singleton, 2009).

synthetic phonics-based approach is effective for second language learners and their overall literacy development (Purewal, 2008).

Purewal (2008) conducted a review entitled '*Synthetic Phonics and the Literacy Development of Second Language Young Learners*'. He found that research evidence related to literacy development and a phonics-based approach for second language learners is quite sparse, as the majority of studies have been conducted with first language learners. As a result of this, one major assumption made is that the language learning experience of second language learners is the same as that of first language learners, and therefore, the same methodological and theoretical constructs that have been designed, can be applied to all learners.

However, as Purewal argues, it is evident that second language learners have different language experiences, as they already possess knowledge of a first language, and it is well established in the literature that the language learning processes are quite different for second language learners, than it is for those whose primary language is English (e.g. Aebbersold & Field, 1997; Birch, 2002; Koda, 2005 – all cited in Purewal 2008).

For example, in the United Kingdom, the use of a synthetic phonics-based approach has been highly advocated by educational policy-makers. However, a sample of research studies relating to second language young learners indicated that although word recognition and word identification was enhanced in all of the included studies, the effects on comprehension were not statistically significant.

## Criticisms of the synthetic phonics approach

There is not a great deal of criticism of the synthetic phonics approach. It is widely regarded as an effective method for teaching literacy to all children.

However, existing criticisms focus upon it being a fragmented approach to reading, which does not allow readers to focus fully on the processes involved in reading (Purewal, 2008; and Goodman 1988 – cited in Purewal, 2008).

Synthetic phonics has been criticised as an approach because, as some opponents claim, it does not get children excited about books and literacy, and because it may not be suitable for all children (Rosen, no date available). Rosen recognises some of the potential merits of synthetic phonics, but argues that '*it is not enough*' and that it is '*only one strategy that will help a child to learn to read*'.

Also, the concept of a phonics-based approach assumes that learners already have sufficient vocabulary knowledge in the language (Purewal, 2008). For example, as Nuttall, (1996 – cited in Purewal 2008) writes; '*the question for us is whether phonics rules can help foreign language readers to identify unfamiliar words. The use of phonics assumes that once readers know how a word is pronounced, they will associate it with the spoken word and therefore understand it*'.

## Further research

There is a strong evidence-base as to the merits of a systematic phonics-based approach to teaching reading, and this is widely regarded as an effective approach.

The evidence on learning phonics for children with EAL is very limited. Purewal (2008) concludes that further research is still required in terms of synthetic phonics and second

language learners, and that the distinction between the effects on first and second language learners needs to be made clearer in future research.

There is also very limited research in terms of the effects of phonics across different ability groups, for example for children with low levels of literacy. There are a number of interventions and 'catch-up' provisions for children with literacy difficulties.

There is currently no evidence available as to what the effects would be if a child missed the start of school, and missed the initial introduction to phonics.

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You can download this booklet online at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/teachingstyles/phonics>

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